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PERSONAL REFLECTIONS ON MODERN EVANGELICALISM IN THE CHURCH OF ENGLAND

Jonathan Fletcher

2017 marks fifty years since the first National Evangelical Anglican Congress (NEAC) was held at the University of Keele. The author, who was present as an ordinand and has been involved in Anglican Evangelical causes ever since, offers some personal reflections on evangelicalism in the Church of England during the past half-century.

Historians, it has been said, are paid for being wise after the event. The game of analysing past events is an easy and delightful game to play with no clear winners or losers. The following is an attempt to sketch out the fortunes and misfortunes of Anglican Evangelicalism over the twentieth century from a very personal and therefore limited perspective.

It could have appeared that Evangelicals had the ball at their feet at the end of the nineteenth century. The fruit of the evangelical revival, which included the continuing effects of the strategic ministry of Charles Simeon and the redoubtable work of J. C. Ryle as the first Bishop of Liverpool and of Bishop Knox of Manchester, could have given the impression that the Church of England was all set to return to its Protestant and Reformed roots. Alas, other factors were in play so that by the 1920s, despite an evangelical victory in the House of Commons over the 1928 Prayer Book, Evangelicalism was entering its doldrum years. Other influences had been at work. In the secular world it seemed that Darwin had bowed God out of the physical world, Marx had bowed God out of history, and Freud was bowing God out of the inner man. German liberalism, despite the valiant counter-attack by Westcott, Lightfoot and Hort, was undermining confidence in the scriptures. The Tractarian Movement convinced many that either the Protestant Reformation had been a mistake or that the Thirty-Nine Articles, properly understood, bore a Roman Catholic interpretation, hence tract 90. Litigation against the Tractarians produced martyrs.

Another possible factor that has been suggested is that some of the brightest theological brains were recruited for the mission field and so were not available to fight the evangelical cause here at home. For instance, G. T. Manley who had beaten Bertrand Russell in the Maths Tripos at Cambridge at the start of the twentieth century and who

wrote an excellent little commentary on Deuteronomy went abroad as a missionary and so was lost to fighting theological battles at home.

There were two self-inflicted wounds. Evangelicalism stood firmly on the substitutionary atonement of the Lord Jesus Christ as central to the gospel. John Stott in his introduction to *The Cross of Christ* describes the incident when there was the big split between the Cambridge Inter-Collegiate Christian Union (CICCU) and what was then the Student Christian Movement (SCM). This is the account of CICCU's Norman Grubb regarding the crucial issue: "After an hour's talk, I asked Rollo (who was President of the SCM), "Does the SCM put the atoning blood of Jesus Christ central?" He hesitated and then said, "Well we acknowledge it but not necessarily central." Dan, Dick and I then said that this settled the matter for us in the CICCU. We could never join something that did not maintain the atoning blood of Jesus Christ at its centre, and we parted company." A few years later came the second split over the absolute authority and infallibility of Scripture. There were those who perceived that the "home" headquarters of the Church Missionary Society (CMS) were not standing firm on this issue (whereas more of the CMS missionaries in the field were) so some broke away and formed the Bible Churchmen's Missionary Society (now Crosslinks). From there on those who held to the centrality of the substitutionary death of Christ and the irrefragability of Scripture called themselves Evangelicals, but they were branded conservative Evangelicals. They in their turn branded the others as liberal Evangelicals. When you add into this mix the growing ecumenical movement (the uncontrollable urge to merge) one can see that Evangelicalism was entering a difficult stage. The 1920s and 1930s can therefore be seen as the "doldrum" years for "conservative" Evangelicals. The "liberals" seemed to have all the best theological brains, capturing such luminaries as Max Warren, Stephen Neill, Douglas Webster and a little later Charlie Moule, Henry Chadwick, and Donald Coggan. Evangelicals were warned against reading theology at university and only a few brave souls such as John Wenham and Alan Stibbs courageously entered the lists. A fine work was maintained in a number of parishes, but in many ways the flame was kept burning through the parachurch organisations, Crusaders, Scripture Union and CSSM ("Don't underestimate the under eights!") and, most importantly, the Inter-Varsity Fellowship (now UCCF). It is difficult to overestimate what is owed to these movements and perhaps especially to the IVF—with its leaders such as Douglas Johnson, and the "Iwerne" camps under the auspices of the SU and the leadership of Eric Nash.

The Second World War produced great changes. There now arrived at university those who had either served in the war—or, a little later, those who had done National Service—and as a result they were considerably humbler than those who had gone straight from school. This was the era of great university Missions run by Christian Unions. The American Evangelist Dr Donald Barnhouse's CICCUM Mission (1948) led to the conversion under God of David Sheppard (England cricketer and bishop of Liverpool) and Nigel Sylvester (later to lead the Scripture Union). Martyn Lloyd-Jones had begun during the war his outstanding ministry at Westminster Chapel and was also making a massive contribution to the work of the IVF and IFES. John Stott was emerging as the young key leader of Anglican Evangelicals. He and Maurice Wood (vicar of St. Mary's Islington, for a long time the home of the Islington Conference) gave their total support to Billy Graham for his 1954 Harringay Crusade. For 3 months, almost every night of this Crusade, Harringay was full to capacity. Many were converted. Many also signed up for the ordained ministry. They were great days. It was said that London came to the brink of revival. John Stott's influence on Anglican Evangelicalism cannot be overstated. His rectorship of All Souls Langham Place which began in 1950 meant that eventually All Souls took over from St Mary's Islington the leadership of Evangelicals in London. John Stott's initiative in reviving the "Eclectics" group of younger evangelicals was also very significant and led to the first National Evangelical Anglican Congress (NEAC) at Keele in 1967 which has been described as the high point of post-war Anglican Evangelicalism.

Something had happened in the year before Keele. Much has been written about what occurred on 18 October 1966 at the Second National Assembly of Evangelicals. (The latest book is entitled *1966 and All That* by Basil Howlett.) John Stott was in the chair. Dr Martyn Lloyd-Jones was the main speaker. It seemed as if Lloyd-Jones was appealing to evangelicals to leave their denominations which were contaminated by liberalism and the ecumenical movement, and join one clear evangelical body, much as the Fellowship of Independent Evangelical Churches has become. John Stott took the unprecedented and, according to some, irregular step of challenging this from the chair saying that such a move would be untheological, unbiblical and unhistorical.

Up to this point denominational issues had not played a major part. The first love for evangelicals had tended to be for the CUs, SU and Keswick. Evangelical scholarship was at last growing through the work of Tyndale House and the subsequent Tyndale commentaries and the

outstanding Tyndale monographs by such great scholars as Alan Stibbs, Alan Cole, Alec Motyer, and F. F. Bruce. Dr Tasker had been won for the evangelical cause through the ministry of Westminster Chapel. Dr Lloyd-Jones seemed to be attacking all the “main line” denominations. With hindsight both Lloyd-Jones and Stott would seem to have been right! The divergence this caused was tragic. Anglican Evangelicals needed the free church evangelicals to keep them sound. The free church men needed Anglicans to keep them in touch with the world. There was now a mutual suspicion that hadn’t really been there before, and only recently seems to be healing through such organs as *Evangelicals Now* and the annual Evangelical Ministry Assembly run by The Proclamation Trust.

But back to NEAC at Keele in 1967: about 1000 of us gathered having been prepared by an outstanding study book, edited by Dr Packer entitled *Guidelines: Anglican Evangelicals* [note the order] *Face the Future*. The contributors included Jim Packer, John Stott, James Atkinson, Michael Green, Alec Motyer, Philip Hughes, and Norman Anderson. (It is hard to see that such a star-studded cast could be assembled now.)

The aim of these founding fathers, in the words of Alec Motyer, was to “*crusade* to bring back the Church of England to its Protestant and Reformed faith established by law” (as in Her Majesty’s coronation oath!). But NEAC proved to be a two-headed monster (to use Dr Roger Beckwith’s phrase). For the baton was handed to some younger evangelicals whose aim was to make sure that evangelicals had a place at the table. (It was not till Maurice Wood became bishop of Norwich in 1971 that they were represented in the House of Bishops.) The cracks began to appear at Keele. It was Maurice Wood who at a very late evening plenary session pleaded with us not to pass a motion calling for the main service every Sunday to be a Communion Service. He was not heeded. One of the younger evangelicals, Colin Buchanan, to whom leadership was now entrusted wrote in a private letter: “The baton was handed to us as this plan simply to fire off the big guns which are in *Guidelines* was clearly not carrying the confidence of the younger clergy. It was an amazing decision only six months before the congress. Part of what I had to draft related to this issue of ecumenism and unity, and here I did indeed take the opposite line from Phillip Hughes in *Guidelines*, and it carried the judgement of the thousand participants although I was not there myself. One of my own thrusts in the 1960s was to point out that evangelicals knew how to be less than 10% (steel themselves to die in the last ditch and defy all opponents), and how to be more than 50% (run out those with whom you disagree) but had no idea how to go from less

than 10% to more than 50%. The only way that can be done in the kind of mixed church we are is by strong participation in the life of this church, sometimes settling for second bests or even compromises.” Very revealing. I am not sure Cranmer and the Reformers would have agreed!

So they heeded the call to get involved in the structures of the Church of England but in order to accept positions as archdeacons and bishops they began to compromise on what had been evangelical shibboleths but which they regarded as secondary issues. Theologically the test for “soundness” had been accepting the unity of Isaiah and a sixth century BC date for Daniel, and Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch. Ecclesiologically the shibboleths had been not turning to the East in the creed, taking north side position at the Lord’s Supper and not wearing sacramental robes. In the mid-1960s the illegal habit of wearing such vestments was overturned as now stoles, chasubles and albs could be worn legally, but the hypocritical point was made that they were to have no theological significance. George Goyder pointed out to the Archbishop of Canterbury, Michael Ramsey, that mitres had not been included. “We forgot those” said Ramsey. Mitres, therefore, it could appear remain illegal; they are certainly heretical as it is the word used for the high priest’s crown—we have a high priest and we do not need any others! And, of course, they look absurd, a cross between a Druid and the Mikado.

It is what has happened post Keele that should concern us. A second NEAC took place 10 years later (1977) in Nottingham. Whereas at Keele the gospel was affirmed, at Nottingham it appeared to be assumed. John Stott appeared to apologise for evangelicalism, saying that we did not have a monopoly on the truth. Significantly his next two books—*2 Timothy* and *Christ the Controversialist* in effect claimed that evangelicals were the true Christians!

The third NEAC was held at Caister in 1987. This was a disaster for the conservative evangelicals. One young conservative sat in stunned and shocked silence for half an hour, so appalled was he. Another such sadly assumed that he didn’t really belong here. Shortly after Caister, John Stott gathered a dozen or so of us to his home at 12 Weymouth Street sadly asking: “Where do we go from here?” He had been allowed a short slot each morning, where he had sought to correct some of the things that had been said the day before. There was no NEAC ten years later but a fourth NEAC took place in Blackpool in 2003. Initially it looked more promising, as the emphasis was going to be on the cross, the Bible and mission—a valiant attempt to restate evangelical convictions. But without

any consultation with the organisers of this congress, a group hijacked the gathering with a fringe meeting that in its turn produced Fulcrum.

How did all this happen? This is where analysts differ in trying to trace the various developments. Due mainly to John Stott's great leadership Anglican evangelicals had remained largely united until Keele. Then, partly because of a new confidence borne of the high numbers, and partly because of the influence of those to whom the baton was passed, various groupings or tribes began to emerge. Subtly these younger Evangelicals began to identify themselves as Evangelical Anglicans as opposed to what John Stott always insisted should be Anglican Evangelicals. Their Anglicanism meant more to them than their Evangelicalism.

Since the early 1960s the charismatic movement had been growing in popularity and influence. The early charismatics were evangelicals first and foremost, and St Helen's Bishopsgate, All Souls Langham Place and Holy Trinity Brompton worked together on several projects. The seeds for this movement might be traced to the Keswick convention with its implication that a second "surrender" step was needed after the first step of repentance and faith. (John Stott's Keswick Bible Readings published in *Men Made New* and his book *Baptism and Fullness* should have solved this issue.) The "charismatics" were gaining ground, and soon some could think of themselves as evangelical charismatics, having more in common with a "tongue-speaking" Roman Catholic than with a non-tongue speaking evangelical. The title of Newsome's book *Parting of Friends* (describing the early days of the Tractarian movement) aptly and sadly describes what was happening to "charismatics" and "non-charismatics".

As happened in the early 1920s—and indeed will always happen, for liberalism will never go away—there emerged those who insisted on being thought of as evangelicals but who claimed to be "open" and to have "moved on". Sadly to "move on" was to "move away" from their Evangelical roots (in CUs) and to go soft at the edges both on the incorrigibility of Scripture and on ethical issues. For them no longer was the Bible the final word on matters of faith and conduct.

There was one aspect of John Stott's legacy that may not prove to be wholly helpful. There are undoubtedly social implications of the gospel. Wesley Bready's marvellous book *England Before and After Wesley* describes the enormous change that took place in England as a result of the preaching of Wesley and Whitefield. It has been estimated that three-quarters of the charitable societies founded in the nineteenth century came from Evangelicals—Wilberforce, Shaftesbury and Barnardo are not the only ones. At the risk of being slightly unfair, let me quote John Stott

in 1966 at Berlin. “The commission of the church is not to reform society but to preach the gospel. Certainly Christ’s disciples who have embraced the gospel, and who themselves are being transformed by the gospel are intended to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world. That is, they are to influence the society in which they live and work by helping to arrest its corruption and illumine its darkness. They are to love and serve their generation and to play their part in the community as responsible Christian citizens. But the primary task of the members of Christ’s church is to be gospel heralds not social reformers. The commission of the church is not to heal the sick but to preach the gospel.” Amen.

But ten years later at Lausanne he had changed and said, “Today I would express myself differently. It is not just that the Great Commission includes a duty to teach converts everything that Jesus had previously commanded, and social responsibility is among the things that Jesus commanded. I see now more clearly, not only the consequences of the commission, but the actual commission itself must be understood to include social as well as evangelistic responsibility unless we are to be guilty of distorting the words of Jesus.” If we read the second volume of Timothy Dudley-Smith’s magnificent biography of John Stott it seems that some of his disciples went down this road, as was evident at Caister. Stott would always claim that *The Cross of Christ* was his magnum opus. Others would claim it was *Issues Facing Christians Today* which some pleaded with Stott not to publish.

Another stream that began to flow in the post-Keele years could be best described as a renewed Reformed Protestantism with a concern for careful expository preaching. Some in the evangelical wing were a bit suspicious of the Reformed position because its recognised leaders were such men as Dr Martyn Lloyd-Jones who had been iffy about Billy Graham and “mass evangelism.” The older evangelicals were passionate about soul-winning and the “Reformed” types did not seem to be. It took the example of John Stott and visits from certain Australian evangelists such as John Chapman to save some from slipping into a form of Arminianism. This went hand-in-hand with John Stott’s masterly expository preaching—and his *Bible Speaks Today* series. Dick Lucas would claim that The Proclamation Trust which has been so instrumental in encouraging expository preaching was just building on the work and example that John Stott had set. This stream has many strengths but can often come over as rather superior and, in Oliver Barclay’s words, can appear to move “from mind to will and bypass the heart.” “God forbid,” wrote Don Carson, “that we should produce preachers who are not first and foremost pray-ers.” “Getting the

Bible right” is essential but it must never replace a love for the Lord Jesus which was such a wholesome mark of the old pietists.

As these different post-Keele streams grew, tensions between them became more apparent. This was evidenced in the *Churchman/Anvil* saga which has been well documented by Andrew Atherstone.¹ *Churchman*, the mouthpiece of the Church Society, was increasingly carrying articles that were essentially liberal. Some of us cancelled our subscription. Whereupon John Pearce to his great credit insisted on *Churchman* returning to its orthodox “conservative” roots. This was too much for the open/Fulcrum evangelicals who immediately founded a rival journal called *Anvil*.

Which brings us to Reform—in many ways the true heir to the founding fathers of Keele. Well before 11 November 1992 when synod was to vote on women’s ordination to the priesthood, John Pearce gathered a group of forty or fifty at St Paul’s Robert Adam Street in order to take counsel together as to what we could do to influence the vote. We did not want to threaten. A letter was sent to the church press expressing a number of our evangelical concerns. With the exception of Jim Packer and Roger Beckwith, we were all incumbents, including such leaders as Dick Lucas and Miles Thomson. The following week a letter appeared in the church press written by an “evangelical” archdeacon claiming that the twelve signatories of the previous letter were “insignificant” (*sic*) and unrepresentative. Next, two hundred and fifty wrote a letter to all synodsmen again expressing our fears. On 11 November the vote just scraped past, making way for women’s ordination. John Pearce immediately wrote to the 250 signatories inviting them to a conference to be held at Swanwick to work out the way ahead.

Meanwhile, totally independently, David Holloway, the vicar of Jesmond Parish Church, who had bravely and consistently sought to implement the Keele call, gathered a private group of clergy to discuss finance and what we should do about the “voluntary” tax called Quota which in many places was being used to sustain heretical ministries.

At about the same time some younger clergy expressed their fears as to the way things were moving and approached older clergy for advice and counsel. On the strength of this appeal, financial means were found to enable Phillip Jensen to give up some of his summer holiday and come from Sydney—not to tell us what we should do but to explain some of the actions that had taken place in Sydney.

¹ Andrew Atherstone *An Anglican Evangelical Identity Crisis: The Churchman-Anvil Affair of 1981–84* (London: Latimer Trust, 2008)

John Pearce then very graciously agreed that the conference at Swanwick could be broadened to include other concerns as well as the issue of women's ordination which was, of course, the presenting issue. The conclusion of this conference at Swanwick was that a committee should be set up of grass roots incumbents to establish a network of churches who wanted to work for the reform of the Church of England on a range of issues. Such, as already noted, was the original aim of Keele. David Holloway repeatedly challenged us with the four possible courses of action to take when a denomination was in decline. There would be those who would jump ship, as advocated by Lloyd-Jones. Hence the growing number of "independents" at our theological colleges. Then there would be those who went with the flow. We have seen many, alas, who have been "promoted" having gone soft on some of the issues. Thirdly, there would be those who would "ghettoise". This was always the traditional evangelical reaction. We would steadily get on with preaching the gospel in our patch/parish. We had then security of tenure, so we did not get involved. The fourth option was to *contend* as advocated in Jude 3. For those of us who had been encouraging young men to get ordained we could not abandon them. We had to enlist and contend. Hugh Palmer was initially the chairman but he handed over to Philip Hacking with his credibility as an evangelist, a parish vicar and a Keswick speaker. Jim Packer joined the committee later in the year when the Reform covenant was hammered out. It remains an outstanding statement of the convictions and concerns of Reform's total commitment to the Church of England and our doctrinal formularies.

Fears and criticisms were soon expressed. Reform was "schismatic, war-mongering and law-breaking." It was a bit rich to be accused of law-breaking by Anglo-Catholics as they had shown that it was by breaking the law that the law was changed! As for being schismatic it was those who were departing from the evangelical faith as enshrined in the Thirty-Nine Articles who were the ones who were really divisive.

What has happened since then? Positively, Reform punched above its weight. Thanks to very good press officers, Gordon Fyles and then Rod Thomas, when the press wanted the evangelical line on an issue they approached Reform. Taking seriously the need to be involved, more Reform types stood for General Synod, where again clergy such as Rod Thomas, Angus MacLeay, David Banting and several brave lay men *and women*—it is invidious to mention names—spoke up and were respected. The issues that arose initially concerned ordination and consecration of women. (For many years, with the exception of Wallace Benn who was

Area Bishop of Lewes from 1997–2012, complementarian evangelicals were not represented by a single bishop until Archbishop Welby kept his word—in the face of criticism—and consecrated Rod Thomas.) It was inevitable once women had been ordained as presbyters that some would have to be consecrated as bishops. As the then Bishop of London stated in the Lord's debate (as reported in Hansard), the church only recognises two orders—deacons and presbyters, and if women can be made presbyters then in due course bishoprics will follow. Whereas one might be able to live with the neighbouring parish having a woman vicar who would not impinge on one's ministry, it would be impossible to serve under a woman bishop unless a distinction could be made between her legal authority—possibly acceptable—and her spiritual authority, which would be unacceptable.

The effectiveness of Reform has varied from diocese to diocese. It has justly been accused of being reactive rather than proactive. This has caused understandable frustration. It would be also true to say that some of Reform's fears have been self-fulfilling, and driven Reform more into a corner. Nonetheless where a diocese has established a strong Reform network as in Chelmsford and Southwark there have been real achievements. It is also fair to point out that the first GAFCON in Jerusalem could hardly have taken place without the strong support from Reform. It is too soon to say how effective GAFCON will be. The Jerusalem manifesto is excellent but not as tight and clear as the Reform covenant. Similarly we wait to see how effective AMiE will be, and whether ReNew can implement Reform's aims in a positive and proactive way. As always the enemy will attack evangelical unity. We shall need Elijahs and Obadiah's but we must stand together.

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